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ABSTRACT

A careful use of emphasis by students in their writing can be promoted by some exercises assigned by composition teachers. A drawing exercise can help students learn that changing the length of sentences makes paragraphs more interesting. Using Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five categories of grief to consider times of depression in students' lives helps broaden their ability to think, and structured assignments with some free choice can help them move toward clearer thinking. A second drawing exercise can help students consider patterns of experience, while physical movement combined with a writing exercise can help put motion into composition. Each exercise gives students tools for reflecting on their abilities and feelings and provides an experience of space as a crucial tool for the writer. (TJ)

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EMPHASIS: FIVE WAYS TO CURE BORING STUDENT WRITING

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In dealing with groups of both students and adults, I am increasingly aware that the assumptions indicate a whole level of thinking which is crucial to communication. Assumptions are facts accepted as true without proof and they underlie most of what we think and say. The material which follows is based on certain assumptions of mine with which some may not agree, but if you know what I assume, then perhaps it will be easier to follow my trend of thought.

There are six assumptions that I am aware of and following them I will suggest five techniques which seem to me to follow from these in some fashion.

ASSUMPTIONS

1. I assume a definite understanding of learning which has little to do with accumulating chips of information into a woodpile life of the mind. It is tempting to think of learning as information consumed, in an age when information is one of our prize commodities. Such stockpiling may provide one with the weapons for verbal combat, for proving oneself, but as a basic life metaphor, win/lose suggests life as a kind of war, economically profitable as all wars are, but a continuing guarantee that looking out for Number One is the only stance for life does not include the humanizing element that education is for me.

2. I assume that in the 1970's humanity has come up with a new sense of time- time as a gift and this implies patience with and understanding of process and a sense that categories of judging value and direction must come from within, that one is no longer forced to determine oneself or to define oneself in terms of work. Many years may exist after a person retires from official work and for that time to be productive and satisfying those who are students today, need to understand the importance of reflecting on their own experiences.

3. Since the focus of most of my courses is writing and since I deal with 16, 17, and 18 year old girls, I assume the thing that interests them most is themselves and therefore I need to provide them with tools to reflect on their own experience and to write about it.

4. Further, my experience tells me that most senior high school students consider their own writing boring before I even get near it. They make the assumption that their writing is boring and this suggests to me that as a teacher I need to offer them windows into themselves and the dynamic of their own lives.

5. I assume that enabling thinking is the most important thing an educator can provide a student with and that thinking is a process which is active and involving and which leads to the perceptions of relationships among things and people upon which further growth can be built.

6. Finally, I assume that there are ways which will help a student move away from boredom within themselves and subsequently within their writing.

EMPHASIS: I have chosen the concept of emphasis in dealing with this student problem because it is so natural to the human being. A girl may dress in tones of brown and beig and camel and to draw the outfit together may add a bright orange scarf. This touch of emphasis is easy to do and in many cases so natural and spontaneous that it is done with little thought. It is a simple matter to raise or lower one's voice to gain emphasis and to draw attention. I recall a phrase from a very popular novel, Ordinary People, "the monotonous beauty of wealth" and have discovered in teaching both writing and art that students have very little experience of the gloriousness of simplicity of line or of shape or of a carefully chosen word accurately placed in the larger space of a paragraph. Students often use the principle of emphasis in reverse. Most teachers spot quickly the unprepared student who buries her head in a book-held upright and alert in a hope to convince the watching teacher that she really is prepared and totally engrossed. The experienced teacher knows too that this camouflage actually serves as an emphasis on how she is not prepared. I like what I have tried with emphasis, because it is easy with little expense in both time and materials. It works in a single paragraph as well as in a larger piece of writing and because it seems to lead the student to a true REVISION of her work in which she can see some results.

I would like to suggest briefly and illustrate five exercises to promote a careful use of emphasis as a way toward both student life and paragraph life. I willuse the paragraph in speaking but all of these items work at correcting and re-focusing longer works too.

EXERCISE 1. On a rectangular piece of white paper of any size place nine black dots of equal size and equally distant from the margins of the paper and from each other. (FIGURE ONE) Students easily see that this simple composition is uninteresting for the obvious reason that each circle is exactly the same; there is no focus of interest. On a second sheet of paper the same size as the first place the same nine dots at random allowing the dots to be both large and small and to overlap at some points.(FIGURE II) Again, students see easily that this composition is more exciting and more interesting, meaning that it holds their attention. Relationships between and among the dots are more apparent and some sense of importance is given to some circles.

Following this short visual exercise, students may take their own paragraphs or one which has been prepared for them and with them I perform an analagous operation. Almost all "dull" paragraphs have sentences of similar length. These sentences act like the dots in Figure 1. Change just the length of the sentences and one has a very simple way to provide more interest. Make a few sentences of no more than two or three words, an exclamation, perhaps! Combine some of the paragraph material into a complex or compound sentence. If a student can do this, then she will have some grasp of the function of subordination and emphasis and this simple rearranging of parts will make the paragraph in revision more like the circles in figure two. I have found that students enjoy making their own random circle drawings. The result of this lesson is not only a freah paragraph but also several drawings--simple designs of which a student can be proud. The lesson has a side effect,too, because inevitably a student will doodle in color and if the teacher so chooses, he or she might show how a bright color in a small circle will draw the eye just as an especially fine phrase in a paragraph may become dominant.

EXERCISE 2 The second exercise is a simple suggestion about refocusing which becomes re-thinking. No one can work long with teen age girls without being privy to the effect of boys in their lives and the vicissitudes that surround getting, having and preparing for events involving boys led me to this insight. The night of the senior dance one of my students had the experience of her date calling to say something had happened and he would be unable to go. She was already dressed and flowered and assumed that he had just been delayed. The ~~following week~~ we heard Dr.Elizabeth Kubler-Ross give the five categories proposed in her book ON DEATH AND DYING as the five stages of the terminally ill patient. I was struck by the fact that these same stages, denial and isolation,anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance are the stages most of us go through to cope with the important phases of living as well as dying. The Center for the Humanities in White Plains has an excellent program of 80 slides on Dr. Ross's stages. The next day I showed that program and in the discussion which followed the students began to see that almost all of life's great events have some aspect of dying in them. I asked them to think of a time in which they had been depressed and the subject for a paragraph was working back to see whether they had gone through all these stages. Not one paragraph was boring and so I think that the second suggestion for eliminating boring writing involves just a re-shifting of student focus and thus a re-thinking of their own experience. They enjoyed the process of discovering their own process of coming back to life or acceptance, and I felt that I simply provided them with an alternative way of seeing. Thereafter we tried to find alternatives for looking at events and people as a way to broaden their ability to think. Since an emotion like anger or depression is not a static state but a psychic movement, providing the students with a way to move, became the key.

EXERCISE 3 Having a sense of being able to move is important to growth. Being able to select carefully from one's whole experience gives one a certain power over it. One of the ways I have discovered to get a person to come to a focus and to gain power over it is an experience which changes her view of herself, because it is

contrary to every belief about herself. Most high school students do not believe they can draw and yet they are intrigued with the idea that they might be able to. I have students draw in any way they can three or four simple kitchen objects-- a coffee pot, a frying pan, a jar, a vase. (FIGURE 3). Suggest the objects overlap. Then turn the page and draw them again and again overlapping the lines. When the paper is filled, have the students measure off an inch or two inch square graph over the entire page. With a magic marker or even a pencil begin from left to right to fill in the squares which have now become single pictures in themselves with little to do with the original shapes. Be sure that black and white are alternate This takes concentration and some time, but when she has finished, the student has both an interesting design and a different sense of herself. The different sense rises from the fact that she has completed a beautiful design when she thought she could not. The student has also given structure to what appeared a chaotic arrangement of lines. Students often begin to look for patterns of shapes and it is one of the great functions of thinking to locate patterns of experience. Educators and psychiatrists are beginning to see that intelligence does not only operate in verbal abstractions. Visual thinking manifests and develops general intelligence and the stepwise progress of visual order reflects the development of the person as a whole. Beauty is lost when meaning and form are split asunder. From the drawn design it is an easy step to scattered listing of items in one's life and from there to selecting a pattern of importance in those events. To know that there are methods for choosing what is important and ways to get hold of one's experience is freeing, and this I have found is another way of diminishing boredom.

EXERCISE 4 Students are bored in class sometimes because they need physical movement and I try to provide that with a surprise twist when I sense these times. Once in w hile I suggest that they just follow me and we leave the classroom and walk to places where they have never been (I hope) in the school. We end by running outside and after ten exhausting minutes return to class where I often hear:" I haven't done that since I was a child--running with no purpose." I ask them to

number a page from one to ten and in just ten lines to write something about when they were a child. They have been surprised and then exhausted and usually settle quietly to do this simple task. I ask them then to use the word green in seven of those ten lines no matter what the subject. Here they begin to be involved in the game of craftsmenship, though they do not as yet know this. Three of the seven times they use the word green it must appear at the end of the line. The task becomes more difficult, but it is possible that for some they are on their way to a poem. At the very least, they have put a piece of experience on paper and have forced some movement into it. I do not push this to a completed poem or piece unless an individual suggests that, but leave it as an exercise. The stimulation that has been provided in the one class usually triggers active response.

EXERCISE 5 This final suggestion is a long term one that has been essential for me. Small children love to explore-- mud, sand, paint, water, material, words- but older ones have inhibitions and the freedom to explore is not a pleasure because it is uncertain and at least my students would rather the sure way to the mark. I have discovered that by providing consistent structured assignments with full explanations of the principles of writing we are working on, as well as an occasional free choice leads students to begin to ask if they can experiment on their own. I have learned that both teachers and students need structure before they can ask for freedom and that when each is ready for the freedom, she will signal it in some way. As a demanding exercise I have asked students to take one of their own essays and draw a box around the most important part of it. Next they are asked to measure with a ruler how many inches that takes up and to compare that measurement with the inches involved with the whole essay. They find the results astounding since wind-up and wind-down almost always occupy the same space. Then I ask them to reduce the warm-up seven inches to one inch by means of complex sentences or compound thoughts or a

more precise choice of words. This is a manageable task and the results are clear and relatively quick to come by. Together we talk about ways to increase the inches devoted to the important in their work. By handling these tasks separately I have discovered that students progress to much clearer thinking and none of it is boring.

In all five suggestions the common theme is presenting students with the tools for reflecting on their own abilities, their own feelings. All provide an experience of space as the most profound tool of the writer for designing words into meaning, of demanding words to say what each one wants them to say. An experience of space that is empty is frightening and as a teacher I have experienced this myself, as I have begun to try new ways. When I am trying something in class and I am not certain and feel certain hesitations, I tell my students what I am feeling. They are feeling much the same experience and we have an avenue which is open then for communication. The boring in a student's life is in one way the world seen only from the outside. To allow students into their own experience, to provide ways for them into that experience allows for real learning and real growth-- a growth that is at home with the intuitive as well as with the rational. Here I think is where the real and lasting education takes place.

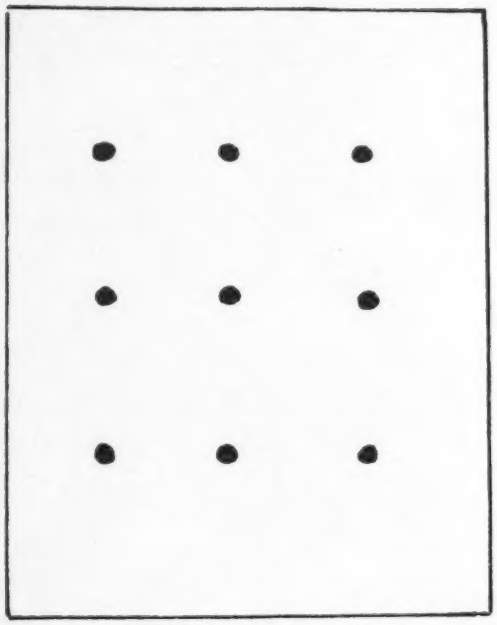

Figure I

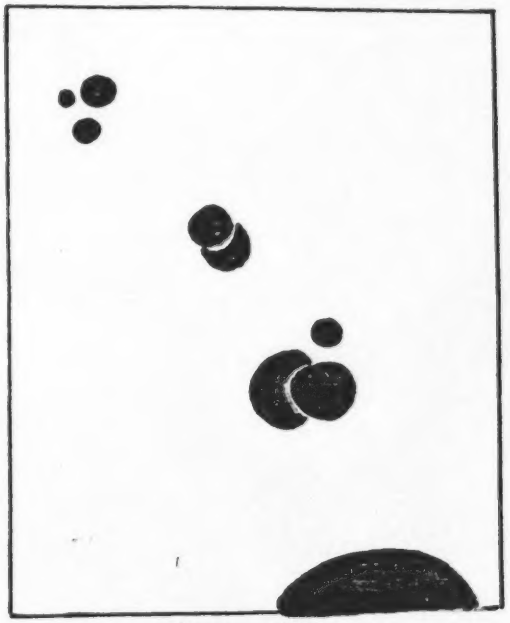

Figure II

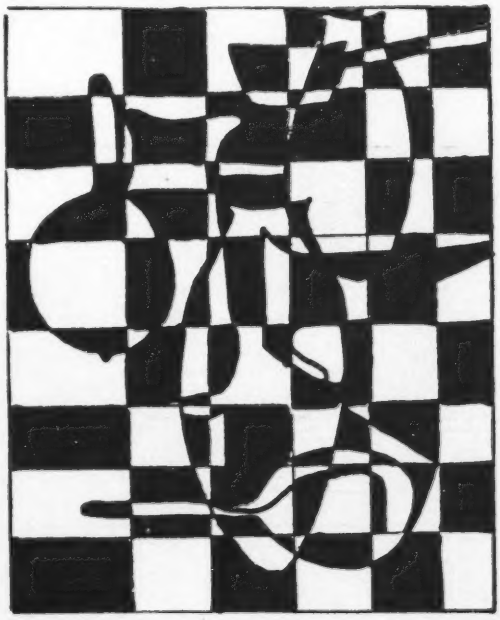

Figure III